Highly selective $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4/\text{SiO}_2$ etching using an $\text{NF}_3/\text{N}_2/\text{O}_2/\text{H}_2$ remote plasma. II. Surface reaction mechanism

Cite as: J. Vac. Sci. Technol. A 38, 023008 (2020); doi: 10.1116/1.5125569
Submitted: 23 August 2019 · Accepted: 3 January 2020 · Published Online: 29 January 2020

Ji-Eun Jung,1,a) Yuri Barsukov,1,a) Vladimir Volynets,1,a) Gonjun Kim,1,a) Sang Ki Nam,1,a) Kyuhee Han,1,a) Shuo Huang,2,b) and Mark J. Kushner2,c)

AFFILIATIONS
1 Mechatronics R&D Center, Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd., 1-1 Samsungjeonja-ro, Hwaseong-si, Gyeonggi-do 18448, South Korea
2 Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, University of Michigan, 1301 Beal Ave., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-2122

a) Electronic addresses: jieun.jung@samsung.com; barsukov.yuri@gmail.com; vladimir.volynets@samsung.com; gonjun.kim@samsung.com; sangki.j.nam@samsung.com; and khee.han@samsung.com
b) Present address: KLA Corp., 2550 Green Road, Suite 100, Ann Arbor, MI 48105. Email: shuo.huang@kla.com
c) Electronic address: mjkush@umich.edu

ABSTRACT
Developing processes for highly selective etching of silicon nitride ($\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$) with respect to silicon dioxide ($\text{SiO}_2$) is a major priority for semiconductor fabrication processing. In this paper and in Paper I [Volynets et al., J. Vac. Sci. Technol. A 38, 023007 (2020)], mechanisms are discussed for highly selective $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$ etching in a remote plasma based on experimental and theoretical investigations. The $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4/\text{SiO}_2$ etch selectivity of up to 380 was experimentally produced using a remote plasma sustained in $\text{NF}_3/\text{N}_2/\text{O}_2/\text{H}_2$ mixtures. A selectivity strongly depends on the flow rate of $\text{H}_2$, an effect attributed to the formation of HF molecules in vibrationally excited states that accelerate etching reactions. Based on experimental measurements and zero-dimensional plasma simulations, an analytical etching model was developed for etch rates as a function of process parameters. Reaction rates and sticking coefficients were provided by quantum chemistry models and also fitted to the experimental results. Etch rates from the analytical model show good agreement with the experimental results and demonstrate why certain etchants accelerate or inhibit the etch process. In particular, the modeling shows the important role of HF molecules in the first vibrationally excited state [HF($v = 1$)] in achieving high $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4/\text{SiO}_2$ selectivity.

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https://doi.org/10.1116/1.5125569

I. INTRODUCTION
As the aspect ratio of features in microelectronics fabrication increases, the need for higher selectivity during plasma etching becomes more acute. Developing processes for highly selective etching of silicon nitride ($\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$) with respect to silicon dioxide ($\text{SiO}_2$) is now a critical step in the fabrication of 3D NAND memory.1 Even though some wet etching techniques are able to achieve high selectivity,2 plasma-based dry etching may be necessary for high aspect ratio features.3 In developing such plasma-based processes, high energy ion bombardment that occurs when using conventional dry etching techniques can produce defects and degrade the quality of the structure.3 To alleviate this damage, dry etching processes using remote plasma sources (RPS) are being developed, which isolate the wafer from energetic particle bombardment, including UV and VUV photons. Since there is no direct plasma exposure of the wafer in the process chamber, only neutral radicals act as etchants. Compared to direct plasma etching processes, isotropic and highly selective etching can be achieved for the proper choice of process conditions such as gas mixture composition, pressure, and RPS power.3

Achieving high selectivity for etching of $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4$ over $\text{SiO}_2$ using RPS is ultimately related to the control of reactive fluxes to the substrate. Several gas mixtures such as $\text{CF}_4/\text{N}_2/\text{O}_2$ or $\text{NF}_3/\text{N}_2/\text{O}_2$ excited with RPS have produced a high $\text{Si}_3\text{N}_4/\text{SiO}_2$ selectivity.1,6 The previous experiments achieved a selectivity of 80 (the ratio of...
the etch rate of Si₃N₄ compared to SiO₂) using an RPS sustained in NF₃/O₂ mixtures. In that process, we found that the main etchant was fluorine (F) atoms, while NO increases the rate of F migration on the Si₃N₄ surface during the etching process.

It has been shown that a solid by-product can be formed on the Si₃N₄ surface during plasma etching. Brewer and Miller reported that a blue film formed on silicon nitride during etching by CF₄/O₂ plasma. Several studies later showed that the solid by-product that builds up during etching by fluorocarbon and NF₃/O₂/NH₃ plasmas, which eventually inhibits the etching, is (NH₄)₂SiF₆ (ammonium fluorosilicate). (NH₄)₂SiF₆ is a relatively weakly bonded salt, which can be decomposed by heating into volatile species (NH₃, SiF₄, and HF). This volatility enables a cyclic process with an annealing step to be used to remove this layer and continue etching.

Posseme et al. showed that a silicon nitride film modified by implantation by light ions can be selectively removed with respect to the nonmodified film. H₂ plasma treatment modified the surface layer of silicon nitride, which enhanced its etch rate by liquid and gaseous HF (Ref. 16) and by an NF₃/NH₃ remote plasma. Sherpa et al. reported that silicon nitride etch rates by fluorinated (NF₃ or SF₆) plasmas can be enhanced by modifying the surface layer either by ion implantation or by atomic hydrogen diffusion.

After investigating remote plasma etching of Si₃N₄ and SiO₂ with NF₃/O₂ and NF₃/N₂/O₂ mixtures, we have conducted additional experiments using NF₃/N₂/O₂/H₂ mixtures with the goal of increasing selectivity using RPS. When varying the flow rate of H₂ in NF₃/N₂/O₂/H₂ through the RPS, the Si₃N₄/SiO₂ selectivity has a narrow peak with a maximum of around 380, which is about five times higher than that obtained in our previous investigation using NF₃/O₂ remote plasmas. The experimental results are shown in Fig. 1. As is discussed in Paper I (Ref. 20), this peak of Si₃N₄/SiO₂ selectivity may be due to the production of the first vibrationally excited state of the HF molecule [HF (v = 1)], which is the most abundant excited state of HF for our process conditions according to zero-dimensional plasma simulations. Note that, although HF has been widely used in wet and dry etching of Si₃N₄, the possible importance of HF molecules in vibrationally excited states in the etching process has not previously been recognized.

Here, we discuss mechanisms for the selective etching of Si₃N₄ with respect to SiO₂ focusing on the role of HF(v = 1) in this process. The experimental results (etch data and measured species densities at the wafer level), the description of the reaction mechanism for NF₃/N₂/O₂/H₂ plasmas, and the results of simulations of gas phase plasma chemistry are presented in Paper I (Ref. 20). In this paper, we propose a mechanism explaining the role of HF(v = 1) in Si₃N₄ and SiO₂ etching based on the results of quantum chemistry modeling. An analytical etching model based on this mechanism was developed and validated with the experimental results.

II. QUANTUM CHEMISTRY MODELING OF ELEMENTARY ETCHING REACTIONS

Quantum chemistry modeling was performed using GAUSSIAN 16 (Ref. 21) to estimate the activation energies for the surface reactions of Si₃N₄ and SiO₂ with etchant radicals. As described in our previous work, the use of clusters is justified due to the insulator properties and strongly localized electron density of Si₃N₄ and SiO₂. The basic cluster models, Si₃N₄H₃F₁₁ and Si₃O₆H₃F₁₁, that correspond to the initial surface sites of Si₃N₄ and SiO₂ are shown in Fig. 2. We
consider here only the surface sites, which are already strongly fluorinated, since we are focused on the reactions producing the final etch products, such as SiF₄. The surface fluorination is a natural result of high fluxes of F-atoms onto the wafer for our experimental conditions. The N–H and O–H bonds are formed by HF inserting into Si–N and Si–O bonds, so the vacancies on terminal N- and O-atoms in the clusters are closed by hydrogen atoms. The B3LYP hybrid functional using the 6–31 + G(d,p) basis set was used for all of the quantum chemistry calculations.

The NF₃/N₂/O₂/H₂ remote plasma produces HF, HF(ν=1), H₂O, and F as the main etchants of both Si₃N₄ and SiO₂. We do not consider other species in the etching model that are potentially important, such as O, NO, H, OH, and FNO. Based on the modeling results discussed in Paper I (Ref. 20), the densities of OH and FNO are too low to make a meaningful contribution to etching. The densities of both O and NO have a weak dependence on the H₂ flow rate (FR), while the density of H has an almost linear increase as a function of H₂ FR. Given these dependencies, O, NO, and H would likely not produce a strong variation in etch rates and selectivity in a narrow range of H₂ FR, as shown in Fig. 1.

As discussed above, a solid surface by-product can be produced during the etching of Si₃N₄. During our experiments, this by-product was removed by an annealing step. The annealing step was not explicitly included in the model. We assumed that the by-product is fully converted into volatile etch products during the annealing step. Details of the etch model are discussed in Sec. III. In short, the etch model describes the beginning of the etching step when the solid by-product just starts to form and the surface is clean or partly clean. At this time, incident radicals can react directly with the substrate. Before the by-product builds up, we assume annealing will have been performed. Note that the by-product only applies to silicon nitride etching. No solid by-product is produced on the SiO₂ surface for our process conditions.

**TABLE I.** Reaction mechanism for Si₃N₄ or SiO₂ etching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Reactions</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>A (s⁻¹)</th>
<th>Eₗ/R (K)¹</th>
<th>Si₃N₄</th>
<th>SiO₂</th>
<th>Si₃N₄</th>
<th>SiO₂</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>HF + θ₁ → θ₁</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>HF(ν=1) + θ₁ → θ₁</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>θ₁ → HF + θ₁</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8.2 × 10⁸</td>
<td>3.0 × 10¹¹</td>
<td>2044</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>θ₁ → 2HF + θ₁</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.1 × 10⁹</td>
<td>8.0 × 10¹⁰</td>
<td>3612</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>H₂O + θ₁ ↔ θ₄</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>θ₄ → EP + θ₁₄</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.18 × 10¹⁰</td>
<td>1.46 × 10¹³</td>
<td>7862</td>
<td>7399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>θ₄ → EP + θ₁₄</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4.02 × 10¹¹</td>
<td>6.55 × 10⁸</td>
<td>1756</td>
<td>8061</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>H₂O + θ₁ → θ₄ + HF</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>F + θ₁ → θ₅ + HF + F</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10</td>
<td>F + θ₁ → EP + θ₁₄</td>
<td>1.0 × 10⁻⁵</td>
<td>0.5 × 10⁻⁵</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹S is the sticking coefficient for the adsorption of gas phase species on a surface site.
²Rate coefficient k = A exp(−(Eₗ/R{T})).

FIG. 2. Cluster models used in the simulations: (a) Si₇N₈H₇F₁₁ and (b) Si₈O₁₂H₃F₁₁.
The elementary surface reactions in the mechanism are shown in Table I. The definitions of surface sites are

1. $\theta_1$: Initial Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site;
2. $\theta_1+$ Underlying Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site;
3. $\theta_2$: HF adsorbed Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site;
4. $\theta_2$: HF + HF($v=1$) adsorbed Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site; and
5. $\theta_2$: HF + H$_2$O adsorbed Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site.

In developing the etching mechanism, we assumed that the densities of surface sites are in the steady state. Reactive radicals produced by the plasma are adsorbed on the initial Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ surface sites, $\theta_1$, or previously passivated sites producing radical-adsorbed-sites (RAS) such as $\theta_2$, $\theta_3$, or $\theta_4$ (reactions R1, R2, R5, and R8 in Table I). Desorption occurs from the RAS producing the initial configuration of the surface (reactions R3 and R4 in Table I). Etching reactions produce gas phase products such as SiF$_4$, NH$_3$, HF, or H$_2$O, denoted by the etch product or EP in Table I, and expose an underlying Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ site, $\theta_1$ (reactions R6, R7, and R10 in Table I). The underlying site $\theta_1$ then functions the same as the initially pristine site, $\theta_1$. In the etching mechanism, we also consider fluxes of HF molecules in the first vibrationally excited state [HF($v=1$)]. These molecules participate in R2, where a second HF molecule adsorbs on an Si$_3$N$_4$ or SiO$_2$ RAS site, and in R7, where etching occurs due to the combined effect of the two adsorbed HF molecules, one being in the vibrationally excited state.

Rate coefficients for reaction $i$, $k_i$, were calculated in the Arrhenius form for the pre-exponential factor ($A$) and the activation energy ($E_a$),

$$k_i = A_i \exp \left( \frac{-E_a}{RT} \right),$$  

where $R$ is the gas constant and $T$ is the temperature (K). The values of activation energy ($E_a$) were calculated as the energy differences between the reactant and the transition state, which were found from the intrinsic reaction coordinate computation using the optimized reactant and product structures. All transition states (TS) were confirmed by the presence of one imaginary frequency from the saddle point in the reactant and product reaction paths. A statistical mechanical approach$^{22}$ was used for calculating the pre-exponential factor $A$ for reactions R6 and R7,

$$A = \frac{k_BT}{h} \times \frac{Q_{\text{ts}}}{Q_{\text{re}}},$$  

where $k_B$, $h$, and $T$ are Boltzmann’s constant, Planck’s constant, and temperature, respectively. $Q_{\text{ts}}$ and $Q_{\text{re}}$ are the overall vibrational partition functions of the TS and the reagent complex, which were calculated by GAUSSIAN 16.$^{21}$

The results of the quantum chemistry calculations are summarized in Table I. The activation energies are results of the calculations. The sticking coefficients and the pre-exponential factors of the desorption reactions (R3 and R4) were fitting parameters. When the elementary reaction is spontaneous and has zero activation energy, the sticking coefficient is $S = 1$. Otherwise, the sticking coefficients are fitted to reproduce the experimental results.

SiO$_2$ and Si$_3$N$_4$ are etched through reactions R6, R7, and R10 by HF + H$_2$O, HF + HF($v=1$), and F, respectively. HF itself without any catalytic assist does not etch both Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$ at room temperature. This inactivity results from HF having to overcome an energy barrier to dissociate and break Si–N or Si–O bonds. It was previously shown that a second adsorbed HF molecule or H$_2$O can significantly decrease this barrier and play the role of a catalyst. For example, Habuka et al.$^{23,24}$ experimentally studied the reactivity of HF with SiO$_2$ and showed that HF etches the surface at temperatures above 1000 K in the presence of water vapor. Hoshino et al.$^{25}$ investigated the mechanism for SiO$_2$ etching by HF using quantum chemistry modeling. They showed that the attack of the first Si–OH hydroxyl group by HF is the rate-limiting step. HF, HF($v=1$), or H$_2$O can form a complex on the HF preadsorbed surface and catalyze etching. The role of water in the catalysis of SiO$_2$ etching by HF was investigated using quantum chemistry methods by Kang et al.$^{26}$ They found that the activation energy of the rate-limiting step for etching by the HF·H$_2$O complex is 22.1 kcal/mol (0.96 eV, 11 140 K) and by HF alone is 35.1 kcal/mol (1.52 eV, 17 639 K). HF($v=1$) can decrease the activation energy of the etching reaction by contributing about 0.5 eV (5800 K) of enthalpy to the system. However, this lowering of the activation energy occurs for Si$_3$N$_4$ but not for SiO$_2$. The vibrational quanta of the O–H and H–F bonds are close to each other, so HF($v=1$) can quasiresonantly transfer its vibrational quantum to the OH group on the oxide surface. This quasiresonant transfer is functionally a two-step process. The first step, R1, is the formation of Si–OH groups upon the adsorption of HF onto SiO$_2$. The second step, R2, is the adsorption of HF($v=1$) followed by the resonant transfer of vibrational energy to Si–OH. After this transfer, the quenched HF acts similarly to an initially adsorbed ground state HF having similar activation energy. At the same time, HF($v=1$) quenching on a nitride surface should be much slower since there is no quasiresonant transfer of the vibrational quantum. If the reaction leading to Si–N bond breaking by the HF·HF($v=1$) dimer is faster than the quenching process, HF($v=1$) can play an important role in Si$_3$N$_4$ etching by lowering the activation energy barrier.

The adsorption of radicals on the surface is spontaneous without an activation barrier for both Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$ (R1, R2, R5, and R9 in Table I). However, etching by reactions R6 and R7 is quite different for Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$. When the surface is passivated by HF + H$_2$O, the activation energy for removing Si$_3$N$_4$ (7862 K) is slightly higher than for SiO$_2$ (7399 K) in reaction R6. On the other hand, with double adsorption of ground state HF, SiO$_2$ has a higher activation energy (8061 K) than Si$_3$N$_4$ (7556 K), based on our quantum chemistry calculations. As mentioned above, if the incident flux of HF contains vibrationally excited molecules, HF($v=1$) contributes about 0.5 eV (5800 K) of enthalpy. HF($v=1$) will be quenched on the SiO$_2$ surface, but, at the same time, it can lower the activation barrier in reaction R7 to 1756 K for Si$_3$N$_4$. The end result is that etching of Si$_3$N$_4$ by HF + HF($v=1$) has a low activation energy of 1756 K, while etching of SiO$_2$ by the same species has a higher activation energy of 8061 K. This difference in the activation energy produces a higher etch rate for Si$_3$N$_4$ compared to SiO$_2$ by reaction R7, which then results in a high Si$_3$N$_4$/SiO$_2$ selectivity. Note that etching of Si$_3$N$_4$ by HF + HF ($v=1$) is also related to reaction R4, desorption of HF from the
surface. HF molecules rapidly desorb from the SiO$_2$ surface without an activation energy. At the same time, HF molecules strongly stick to the Si$_3$N$_4$ surface with a binding energy of 3612 K against desorption, which increases the probability of etching reaction R7.

F-atoms are also etchants of both Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$, whose sticking probabilities (S for R10) were estimated from our previous investigations using NF$_3$/O$_2$ mixtures. Although both sticking coefficients are small, an order of $10^{-5}$, with the F-atom flux being the highest of all the reactants, even these small reaction coefficients contribute to the etch reactivity of Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$.

### III. ANALYTICAL MODELING OF ETCH PROPERTIES

The results of the quantum chemistry modeling were incorporated into an analytical model to calculate etch rates. Based on the elementary etching reactions in Table I, the SiO$_2$ or Si$_3$N$_4$ etch model can be represented by

\[
\frac{d\theta_1}{dt} = J_{HF}S_1\theta_1 + k_{HF}p_{H_2O} \theta_2 + k_{HF}p_{F} \theta_3 + k_{HF}p_{HF} \theta_4 + k_{HF}p_{\text{F}} \theta_5 = 0, \tag{3}
\]

\[
\frac{d\theta_2}{dt} = J_{HF}S_1\theta_1 - J_{HF}S_1\theta_2 - k_{HF}p_{HF} \theta_2 - J_{H_2O}S_1\theta_2 + J_F \theta_1 = 0, \tag{4}
\]

\[
\frac{d\theta_3}{dt} = J_{HF}S_1\theta_1 - J_{HF}S_1\theta_2 - k_{HF}p_{HF} \theta_3 - k_{HF}p_{HF} \theta_3 - J_{H_2O}S_1\theta_3 - J_F \theta_3 = 0, \tag{5}
\]

\[
\frac{d\theta_4}{dt} = J_{HF}S_1\theta_2 - k_{HF}p_{HF} \theta_4 + J_{H_2O}S_1\theta_3 = 0, \tag{6}
\]

\[
\theta_1 + \theta_2 + \theta_3 + \theta_4 = 1, \tag{7}
\]

where $J_{HF}$, $J_{H_2O}$, and $J_F$ are the fluxes of HF, HF($v=1$), H$_2$O, and F-atoms onto the wafer, respectively. These fluxes were derived from the gas phase plasma simulations discussed in Paper I (Ref. 20). The sticking coefficients are fitted to reproduce the experimental results.

The etch rate, ER, is proportional to the rates of reactions R6, R7, and R10 (see Table I),

\[
ER = (k_6p_{F} + k_7p_{HF} + k_{r10}p_{\text{F}}) \times \frac{M}{\rho N_A}, \tag{8}
\]

where $M$ is the molar mass, $\rho$ is the density of the etched material, $\rho_{s}$ is the surface site density, and $N_A$ is Avogadro’s number. Constants used in the analytical model are in Table II.

As discussed above during etching, silicon nitride can be converted into a solid (NH$_4$)$_2$SiF$_6$ salt by gaseous HF after H$_2$ plasma treatment. Hydrogen ion implantation activates the top Si$_3$N$_4$ layer, and the (NH$_4$)$_2$SiF$_6$ salt is formed on the surface by reactions with gas phase HF. If the (NH$_4$)$_2$SiF$_6$ layer exceeds a critical thickness, etching will terminate. We assumed that the internal energy of vibrationally excited HF can be used for the activation of the surface reactions, which leads to transforming the top layer of Si$_3$N$_4$ into the (NH$_4$)$_2$SiF$_6$ salt. When this salt is produced, it is then fully converted into volatile etch products during the annealing step. Our etch model, therefore, describes the initial stage of the etching step (just after annealing and cooling) when the surface is at least partly clean, and species from the gas phase can freely react with the surface.

The simulated HF($v=1$) density in the process chamber has a narrow peak as a function of H$_2$ FR, as shown in Paper I (Ref. 20). HF($v=1$) is mainly produced by the reaction $F + H_2 \rightarrow HF$ ($v=1$) + H. The predicted density of F is sensitive to the surface recombination coefficients used in the model. These recombination coefficients depend on the state of the chamber wall, which is difficult to account for in the model. Given uncertainties in the recombination coefficient, the experimental etch rate and selectivity data were slightly shifted as a function of the H$_2$ flow rate to align with the simulations.

The results from the analytical model and experimental data for Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$ etch rates and etch selectivity are shown in Fig. 3. The model reproduces the experimental data quite well over the range of the available experimental data. The Si$_3$N$_4$ etch rate has a maximum near 21 sccm of H$_2$ flow, which corresponds to the local minimum in the SiO$_2$ etch rate. The result of these two trends is a sharp peak of Si$_3$N$_4$/SiO$_2$ etch selectivity around 21 sccm of H$_2$ flow.

Contributions of each etching reaction by F, HF + H$_2$O, and HF + HF($v=1$) to the total Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$ etch rates as a function of the H$_2$ flow rate are shown in Fig. 4. The decreasing trend of Si$_3$N$_4$ etching by F (R10 in Table I) follows the flux of F-atoms onto the wafer as a function of the H$_2$ flow rate. With the increase in the H$_2$ flow rate, the reaction of F with H$_2$ depletes the F-atom density and flux. Contributions to Si$_3$N$_4$ etching by HF + HF($v=1$) (R7 in Table I) follow the flux of HF($v=1$). The flux of HF($v=1$) is highest around 21 sccm of the H$_2$ flow rate, where the gas phase densities of F and H$_2$ are approximately equal. It is at this flow rate that the contribution of HF($v=1$) to the etching is maximum. In Paper I (Ref. 20), it is shown that the H$_2$O production is low if the gas phase densities [H$_2$] > [F], and rapidly increases in case [H$_2$] < [F]. Therefore, etching of Si$_3$N$_4$ by the HF + H$_2$O mechanism (R6 in Table I) increases as soon as H$_2$O starts to be produced with H$_2$ flow rates over 21 sccm.

The simulated etch rate of SiO$_2$ decreases with H$_2$ flow rates below 21 sccm and increases for larger flow rates, as shown in Fig. 3(b). The main SiO$_2$ etchants are F-atoms for H$_2$ flow rates below 21 sccm and HF + H$_2$O for higher flow rates (i.e., etching by HF catalyzed by water$^{28}$), as shown in Fig. 4(b). The most significant difference between the etching of Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$ is that the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constants</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$M$ (Si$_3$N$_4$)</td>
<td>0.14 kg/mol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$ (SiO$_2$)</td>
<td>0.06 kg/mol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$ (Si$_3$N$_4$)</td>
<td>3200 kg/m$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$ (SiO$_2$)</td>
<td>2200 kg/m$^3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho_s$ (Si$_3$N$_4$ and SiO$_2$)</td>
<td>$1 \times 10^{-5}$ mol/m$^2$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
contribution to SiO\textsubscript{2} etching by HF + HF\textsuperscript{($v = 1$)} is near zero over the entire range of conditions investigated.

The sharp peak of Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} etch rate and the near zero etch rate of SiO\textsubscript{2} by HF + HF\textsuperscript{($v = 1$)} are the main reasons for the high etch selectivity of about 380 that occurs at an H\textsubscript{2} flow rate of 21 sccm. Note that even though Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} has a higher etch rate by HF + H\textsubscript{2}O and F than SiO\textsubscript{2}, this is not sufficient to achieve high selectivity in the absence of HF\textsuperscript{($v = 1$)}. At the same time, our quantum chemistry modeling suggests that among the available reactants in NF\textsubscript{3}/N\textsubscript{2}/O\textsubscript{2}/H\textsubscript{2} remote plasmas, only HF\textsuperscript{($v = 1$)} is able to decrease the etching activation energy barrier for Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} to a low value. The outcome of the combined experimental and modeling studies highlights the important role of HF in vibrationally excited states in highly selective Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4}/SiO\textsubscript{2} etching.

**IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Quantum chemistry and analytical modeling for the etching of Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} and SiO\textsubscript{2} have been discussed for NF\textsubscript{3}/N\textsubscript{2}/O\textsubscript{2}/H\textsubscript{2} remote plasmas as a function of the H\textsubscript{2} flow rate. The etch rates produced by the analytical model reproduce the experimental results, which show a high Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4}/SiO\textsubscript{2} selectivity of up to 380. The flux of HF molecules in the first vibrationally excited state [HF\textsuperscript{($v = 1$)}] plays an important role in achieving high selectivity by reducing the activation energy for reactions of HF with Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4}. The reduction in activation energy enables the reaction with Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} to have a lower activation energy barrier than with SiO\textsubscript{2}. The reaction probability for etching by F-atoms is small for both Si\textsubscript{3}N\textsubscript{4} and SiO\textsubscript{2}; however,
large fluxes of F-atoms produce a finite contribution to etching. Process conditions that produce large fluxes of HF($v = 1$) while minimizing fluxes of F, as can be achieved in NF$_3$/N$_2$/O$_2$/H$_2$ remote plasma sources, maximize the Si$_3$N$_4$/SiO$_2$ etch selectivity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd. The work of S. Huang and M. Kushner was additionally supported by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), Office of Science, Office of Fusion Energy Sciences under Award Nos. DE-SC0001939 and DE-SC0014132.

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